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Shirley Freed
Andrews University

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SHIRLEY ANN FREED

CREATIVITY AND FORGIVENESS

I often think about creation. James Weldon Johnson's poem "The Creation" has been a favorite of mine for years. I especially like the part where he describes the creation of man.

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that He had made.
He looked at His sun,
And He looked at His moon,
And He looked at His little stars;
He looked on His world
With all its living things,
And God said, "I'm lonely still."

Then God sat down
On the side of a hill where He could think;
By a deep, wide river He sat down;
With His head in His hands,
God thought and thought,
Till He thought, "I'll make me a man!"

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.

Shirley A. Freed, Ph.D., is Professor of Leadership and Qualitative Research in the graduate Leadership Program at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Amen. Amen. (Johnson, 1922)

“So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Gen. 1:27, New King James Version). What does it mean to be created in the image of God? We’re a bit afraid to think about it, aren’t we? It sort of seems sacrilegious to think about being like God—in His image. We know ourselves too well—in His image doesn’t often describe our behaviors.

But Browning and Reed (2004) said, “Human beings are born in the image of God, with gifts of creativity and a capacity to love and trust” (p. 59). White (1903) confirms that “every human being, created in the image of God, is endowed with a power akin to that of the Creator—individuality, power to think, and to do” (p. 17). It seems clear: God made us in such a way that we are capable of creating—things, ideas, procedures, strategies, etc.

Imagine what it must have been like for Adam and Eve, with powers of creativity, and with permission to explore and experiment in their garden home. Joyful, wholehearted and full of energy. Created to create. But then fear entered.

“I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself” (Gen. 3:10).

And Adam and Eve’s fear drove them into hiding. God’s beautiful, new friends—hiding. Consider another Bible story found in Matthew 25:14-30. It’s the story of a man with three servants who went travelling to a far country, but before he left he gave three talents to one of his servants, two talents to another and one talent to the third. The one talent man was afraid and hid his talent while the other two used their talents and doubled the value.

The fear in the one-talent man led him to inaction. He was immobilized by his fear and hid the talent in the field. By hiding his talent, he buried all hope that he would use it to create more. Fear destroys the possibility of creativity and investing into the future.

Brown (2010a), in her research on wholehearted living, found this about creativity:

There’s no such thing as creative people and non-creative people. There are only people who use their creativity and people who don’t. Unused creativity doesn’t just disappear. It lives within us until it’s expressed, neglected to death, or suffocated by resentment and fear. (p. 96)

There it is again—fear and the suggestion that all people are created with powers of creativity, but something destroys it—fear and neglect. Brown (2010a) has more to say:

If we want to live and love with our whole hearts, and if we want to engage with the world from a place of worthiness, we have to talk about the things that get in the way—especially shame, fear, and vulnerability. (p. 36)

Talk about it! My heart cries out, “No, I don’t want to talk about shame, fear, and vulnerability.” I started out to write a simple devotion-al—connecting creativity to forgiveness and showing how we need forgiveness for our mistakes, so we don’t recoil and become afraid to try again. But now I’m pulled into fear, shame and vulnerability. I should have known this wasn’t going to be an easy task when my pile of forgiveness books didn’t yield any simple answers. In fact, several were downright discouraging—pointing to the complexity of forgiveness and showing why it’s so difficult. And actual research on forgiveness is even more depressing (Malcolm. W, 2008). Clearly, there are no easy answers.

Even though I’m reluctant, I believe we need to talk about the things that get in the way of whole-hearted living—of creativity. I believe God created humans with the power to think and do—the power to create. So let’s try to talk about it—the things that get in the way of creativity—of whole-hearted living. But first we must consider a couple of definitions from Brown (2010a): “Guilt = I did something bad. Shame = I am bad. Shame is about who we are, and guilt is about our behavior” (p. 41).

Adam and Eve were guilty. They did something bad—really bad. They disobeyed God and consequently were afraid. This drove them into hiding—away from their loving community, away from God.

But what about the one-talent man? He was afraid before he even did anything. In fact, it was his fear that caused him to do nothing. But he blamed the one to whom he owed the one talent in the first place: “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed” (Matt. 25:24). Never mind that he had the same master as the other two servants who managed to pull themselves together and do something constructive with what was given them! The one-talent man was using a strategy from the playbook of our first parents. Adam blamed Eve (and God for giving her to him); Eve blamed the serpent.

In a TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talk, Brown (2010b) points out that blame is a way to discharge pain and discomfort, both of which are related to feelings of being “not enough.” Somehow not measuring up to expectations—comparing ourselves with others and knowing we fall short—leads us into blame. Brown (2007) states:

We are a culture obsessed with finding fault and assigning blame. Holding ourselves or others accountable is a good thing, but blame and accountability are very different. I think the difference between accountability and blame is very similar to the relationship between guilt and shame. Like guilt, accountability is most often motivated by the desire to repair and renew.... On the other hand, we often use blame to discharge overwhelming feelings of fear and shame.... Like shame, blame shuts us down and is not an effective tool for change. (p. 212)

Back to Adam and Eve. They made a huge mistake. They were hiding in fear and guilt. But notice what happened. Before God gave them the consequences of their sin (mistake), He made a promise. He promised that Jesus would come and put enmity between the serpent and the woman and her seed or offspring (Gen. 3:15). What grace! What love! No shame.

And therein lies the secret for dealing with shame and guilt. We have been given a total gift of life and grace. We're accepted and loved in Christ (Eph. 1:6), as long as we remember the gift. Volk (2005) expresses it well:

Our very existence is God's gift. Our redemption from the snares of sin is God's gift. Both are undeserved, and neither could have been deserved. From start to finish, we are always given free of charge and given more than our due. It is therefore only fitting that we give others more than their due—give them gifts that satisfy their needs or delight their senses and imagination, and give them the gift of forgiveness that frees them from guilt and the obligation to pay for their misdeed. (Volf, 2005, pp. 203-204)

But what about shame—that uncomfortable feeling of being “not enough”? Why is it so “sticky?”

Brown (2010a) states that “children who use more shame self-talk (I am bad) versus guilt self-talk (I did something bad) struggle mightily with issues of self-worth and self-loathing. Using shame to parent teaches children that they are not inherently worth of love” (p. 42).

But where does our self-worth come from? I remember the self-esteem movement of the 80s and 90s. I went into schools where teachers and students would start the day with a rousing “I’m getting better and better each day!” and again, “I’m getting better and better each day!” But the trouble is, they weren’t. Learning didn’t increase with all the shouting. Those children needed to learn some skills. They needed to learn how they were created—with the power to think and do.

Let’s get something straight. If we believe God created us in His image, we will embrace the sacredness of our own life and that of everyone else. We will recognize our worth. Psalm 139 makes it clear:

For you formed my inward parts;
 You wove me in my mother's womb.
 I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 Wonderful are Your works,
 And my soul knows it very well....
 How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
 If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.
 When I awake, I am still with You. (Ps. 139:13-18, New American
 Standard Bible)

And when we believe that God loved us so much that He gave us
 Jesus and that Jesus would have come for just one—me—it makes all the
 difference in our sense of self. Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

I don't know when I first realized that God really loves me—that He
 created me to be a unique person. I think I've lived my entire life with
 competing messages. My parents loved me. I had lots of evidence of
 that. I had aunts and uncles whose hugs showed me I was loved and
 accepted. But there were other messages—strong messages about what
 I should and shouldn't do. From birth, there were people trying to
 shape me into what they thought I should be—friends, teachers, pas-
 tors, relatives, colleagues. All tried to shape me “into their image.”
 Guilt and shame got confused. Sometimes I really believed I was bad
 because I couldn't behave the way they expected me to. I was always
 being compared to someone else. My own story, the story of who
 Shirley is and how God created me, dimmed and I started to live another
 story—or many stories—those of other people. The grace story and
 the shame story got mixed together. I wasn't pleasing anyone—not
 myself, not other people, and not God.

But God didn't give up on me. He doesn't give up on anyone. Bit
 by bit, the tangled web of “not enough”—not smart enough, not rich
 enough, not thin enough, not beautiful enough, not strong enough, not
 healthy enough—gave way to a totally engulfing narrative—a narrative
 of love and grace, a narrative of love and belonging, a narrative of
 enough. There is enough grace—God's grace to cover all the blame and
 shame I and others put on me.

Is it easy? No! The competing stories are still present, but now that
 I've talked about them, they can't hide. I have a choice and I know
 what I'm choosing between. And when the stories get confusing, I go
 back to my favorites: *What's So Amazing About Grace?* by Philip
 Yancey. *Epic: The Story God Is Telling*, by John Eldredge. Matthew 27.

And I remember these words:

In the matchless gift of His Son, God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air which circulates around the globe. All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere will live and grow up to the stature of men and women in Christ Jesus. (E. G. White, 1893, p. 68)

Imagine that! An atmosphere of grace encircling the whole world—enough grace to take care of the deep poverty of our spirits. Enough grace to heal the wounds inflicted by guilt, shame, and blame. Enough grace to forgive my waywardness. Enough grace to forgive myself and others. Enough grace to destroy fear. Enough grace to reclaim God's original plan and release the power of creativity in me and others.

It really is pretty simple—if we embrace the grace story and allow ourselves to be embraced by it.

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